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AUTHOR Schwartzberg, Joanne G.
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ABSTRACT

The mother of an 11-year-old deaf child compares her daughter's experiences mainstreamed in a traditional school system (a Hebrew school) and in a Montessori school. The Montessori system is seen to be especially advantageous for the deaf child because of the following characteristics: opportunities for the child to be successful, a visual (rather than verbal) form of education, individualized education, informal teaching styles, no group lessons, a commitment to social education, opportunities for the deaf child to be useful and helpful, and provision of remedial education (such as language therapy). (LS)

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MAINSTREAMING THE HEARING IMPAIRED CHILD:

A PARENT'S EXPERIENCE, MONTESSORI

AND SOME COMPARISONS

JOANNE G. SCHWARTZBERG, M.D.
853 West Fullerton Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

EC 082923

I am speaking to you today as a parent of a profoundly deaf 11 year old. I have no in-depth research, but I would like to offer some directions that are suggested by my limited experience. My daughter has been mainstreamed three ways: first, she has attended a Montessori school from preschool through elementary; second, she has spent several summers at a live-away camp; and third, she spends seven hours a week in a traditional program of religious instruction. In each of these programs she is the only hearing-impaired child.

My first step in preparing this paper was to ask my daughter what she thought was the best education for a deaf child, and why. "First of all," she said, "deaf children should go to school with hearing children so that they will grow up well-adjusted". When I asked her what well-adjusted meant, she said "self-reliant", and then, "cooperative".

"A deaf child can grow up to be very understanding of others and their problems", she went on to say. "If the kids and teachers are understanding of you, then you become understanding of them". When I asked her what she meant by "understanding", she said: "They accept you as a normal person, you can do everything they do, you only need a little help with lipreading".

I asked her if she had any memory of her first days at school and surprisingly she did. She remembered the teacher and the classroom and that "I fitted right in, it was so interesting. School life should be interesting so that you want to learn and feel good. Some things make you feel bad, but there are many other things you can turn to that are interesting and make you feel good. When you finish them you want to do more, learn more".

Jenny's experience in a traditional school system - the kind that most deaf children are mainstreamed in - comes in Hebrew school. I asked her to compare

her Montessori school with her Hebrew school, and she said: "In Hebrew school I don't move around, I sit at my desk and work in a workbook. If I have questions, I have to go ask the principal. My teacher is too busy teaching to take the time out to answer my questions. It would not be fair to the others if she stopped for me". Did the same thing happen at her Montessori school? "Oh no, the teacher always has time to answer questions, everyone can ask him questions. No one can ask questions that way in Hebrew school".

Montessori is periodically rediscovered as a system with built-in advantages for deaf children. In her comments, Jenny touched on several aspects that seemed to be particularly beneficial to her as a deaf child, and it is these areas that I would like to discuss.

To begin with - her feeling that she "fit right in". When she was 2, she spent the mornings 3 or 4 days a week in a small class with 2 other deaf children and 1 teacher. In the afternoons she started in a large Montessori classroom of 30 children and 3 teachers. Although she had been receiving language therapy from the time she was 4 months old, she had, at age 2, a spoken vocabulary of 10 words, which only her mother could understand, and she could lip-read about 30 phrases from my lips, but not from anyone else's.

When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, the report from the program for the deaf was very discouraging. She was still a very poor lip-reader, with a short attention span. She appeared very apathetic and withdrawn in the group, and there was a very real question whether, even with all the early training, she could be educated orally.

The next week I had a conference at the Montessori school where I saw a different child. She was very happy, participated in all activities, had a very long attention span, good eye contact, and was learning very quickly. Her teacher said Jenny was well-adjusted and independent, only had to be shown what to do and then could do it, she behaved no differently than the other children, she caused no extra problem or took up extra time in the classroom. The one area of difficulty her teacher had was over the hearing aids, which she found frightening, particularly when they squealed or the molds fell out of Jenny's ears.

Why was a deaf child able to function so successfully in a Montessori environment? The main reason is that Montessori is primarily a VISUAL method of education instead of the VERBAL one we rely on in our traditional schools for both hearing and deaf children. A 2 year old child entering a Montessori school can learn everything about the layout of the classroom, the role of the teacher, the rules and regulations of the classroom and the use of the didactic materials, by using only his eyes. To work with the materials and learn from them he will need to use another sense - his tactile-kinesthetic sense as well as his vision.

Montessori teachers are trained to follow a very different role than the traditional teacher. In relation to the child, the teacher is trained to always get down at his level and look him in the eye before speaking to him. In a very few words she tells the child to watch her and then she shows him how to do the activity he has chosen. She shows him every step, slowly and completely. Montessorians believe that if you demonstrate and speak at the same time you confuse the child. They talk about the "isolation of concepts": only one concept is presented at a

time. If it is a language lesson, there is a minimum of physical acitivity, if it is a lesson in how to hang up a coat, there is a minimum of talking.

For example, a teacher will demonstrate the sequential steps to washing one's hands - from putting on a rubber apron to protect one's clothes, getting the water, the soap, the cloth, washing, drying, cleaning up everything afterwards, etc. Then the child returns the demonstration, and lo and behold, he can wash his hands all by himself! For Jenny, at 2, this was a source of joy and she washed her hands independently over and over. I realized that I had prevented her from learning to do something she was biologically and developmentally ready to do on her own. I had used handwashing for language lesson time - always giving her the language for the activity: "Here's the soap", "wash your hands", "get them clean", etc. I had insisted that she watch my lips for the language so there was no way she could watch my hands to learn the activity and no way she could be self-reliant and independent.

All Montessori materials are designed to be used by the children independently. The teacher is supposed to provide what Montessori calls the "minimum dose" of teaching - demonstrate the way to use the materials and then step back and let the child work and make his own discoveries. The maxim is "Help me to do it by myself."

In order for materials to be used this way they have to be designed very differently from the way we design materials to teach language to deaf children.

For one thing, they are <u>not</u> open-ended. They can only be used one way. There is a built in "control of error" which means that the materials will be self-corrective. As the child works with the knobbed cylinders, for example,

if he puts one in the wrong hole, in the end he will have a piece left over. No one says he has made a mistake, and, indeed, he hasn't. He sees that he needs to work some more until all the pieces fit. Then he can sit back and admire his achievement. Montessori materials are designed so that the child working with the materials will always be successful. There are no failures. All through the Montessori curriculum, as the children advance through the elementary program, this principle holds - they learn through step-by-step successes.

This is what my daughter meant when she referred to "things that make you feel good. When you finish them you want to do more, learn more".

It was very obvious when she was 2 what "things" made her feel bad - her language lessons which were so full of failure and frustration. Her only feedback of success was a smile on the teacher's face. The necessity for being <u>dependent</u> on the teacher and teacher's lips for all learning and communication is one of the most psychologically difficult aspects of deaf education. There is no way to avoid it, but a Montessori program for a few hours a day, with its stress on independence and success, can be a nice antidote.

Another advantage of the Montessori visual education is that it allows the deaf child to train his mind to a high level of analytical ability which is not possible when both teacher and child grope through the haze of verbal misunderstandings in the usual classroom. How often teachers of the deaf complain that deaf children can't handle abstractions and need everything concrete. Montessorians would say, of course, <u>all</u> children need to have abstract ideas made concrete. They need to see and touch and manipulate concrete materials before they can discover and understand abstract principles.

Concrete materials in math are becoming more accepted these days, but a Montessori curriculum for 5-6 year olds contains equally well developed concrete materials in geography, history, science. The 6-9 year olds get a course in comparative anatomy that would equal some high school courses. The tremendously varied, attractive and concrete materials are easily accessible to the deaf child who has minimal language skills and a dormant mind hungry to learn more about the world he lives in.

My daughter's definition of well-adjusted was self-reliant and cooperative. A Montessori classroom is geared to encourage cooperation. It is a non-competitive education. Children are grouped in age ranges of three years, a family group. They are together not because they are working at the same level, but because they are working at different levels. It is very important for each child to experience each different role: a year as one of the youngest children in the class, then as a middle-aged child - knowing where you have come from and where you are going, and then as one of the oldest children able to teach the younger ones.

As an example, in a 6-9 class I know of, the teacher presented some new materials to a group of four children, on the beaks of different birds. The materials then stayed in the classroom. A few days later she presented materials on the various claws of those birds to a different group of four children. That was all the teaching she did. A week later the class went on a field trip to the Brookfield Zoo and all 30 children knew and recognized the beaks and claws of all the birds studied. They had taught each other in a well-functioning Montessori classroom.

For a deaf child, the opportunity to teach other children, to be useful and helpful to others, is a rare and beautiful experience. And one that I know my daughter treasures. As she says, "deaf children can grow up to be understanding of others and their problems".

In her traditional program in Hebrew school, Jenny is unable to follow the group lectures and discussion, even though it is a small class of 10 children. She cannot interrupt to ask for help. Rather than sit idle, she works in workbooks at her seat, and leaves the class to go to a "resource" teacher with questions. She feels very self-conscious.

The freedom the Monessori teacher has to be available to help children individually, is possible only because the program is based on self-education with some peer education thrown in. From the deaf child's point of view, his or her special problems are almost invisible in the Montessori class where every child receives individual help tailored to his needs.

In a traditional class, the deaf child's needs stand out as different and exceptional. The teacher, working with the whole group, is hampered by the inflexibility of the system, and resource teachers and a wide variety of extra support systems are necessary to help the deaf child function in the class.

However, a deaf child is mainstreamed, he will need special language training in addition to the mainstreamed program. Jenny received 4-5 hours a week of individual language therapy from the age of 3-8 and since then 2 hours a week. By the time she was 8 her language skills in reading and writing were up to her chronological age. At the present she tests in the 99th percentile for

her age in all language skills - spelling, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, etc. While her spoken language is fluent and grammatically correct, she suffers from the problems of intelligibility that are common to deaf speech. With effort she can speak clearly enough to make her needs understandable to strangers and either lipread or obtain in writing the information she needs in return. But when it comes to an exchange of ideas and opinions - as in the discussion I quoted at the start of this paper - a stranger could not understand her, although her teachers, classmates and friends could.

In conclusion, I would like to ask you to think of new ways to plan mainstreamed programs. Instead of starting with the current system and trying to mold and twist the deaf child to fit in, we should start with a program that is good for deaf children and then open it up to hearing children as a new alternative educational system. With the Montessori model in mind, these are the essential characteristics of such a program:

1) Success - The deaf child must be successful in his educational efforts. It must be easy for him to be successful and "feel good".

2) A VISUAL form of education - well planned concrete materials for all subject areas through Junior High level.

3) Individualized education - independent learning programs for all children in all areas to enable each child to progress at his own speed.

4) Informal teaching styles - the classroom teacher as a resource person, always available to answer questions and teach individually.

5) No group lessons - The bane of a deaf child's existence and the cause of greatest suffering is the teacher lecturing at the front of the class. It is not a necessary part of an academic program, and can be abolished.

6) A commitment to social education - by creating a relaxed classroom where children interact naturally with their peers instead of sitting quietly while the teacher talks.

7) An opportunity for the deaf child to be useful and helpful in the school environment.

8) Remedial education - whatever is needed in the way of speech and language therapy, audiological help, etc., should be provided, even if it requires five hours a week of individualized therapy to bring the child up to age level skills.

Only when we offer a program that is really designed for deaf children will we realize their true potential.

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